Small Islands Big Issues

Issues in Brief

Small Islands and Fishing: Caught in a Global Squeeze

The statistics are alarming. Of the 17 major fishing grounds worldwide, 13 are depleted or in serious decline. Almost every commercial fish species in every ocean and sea has been classified as "depleted", "fully exploited" or "overexploited" by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Global catches have stagnated since 1989.

Today, small islands are caught in the same squeeze facing the global fishing industry: too many boats chasing too few fish. Many small islands have suffered declining fish catches over the past decade, especially of fish that live close to shore, where most fishermen operate. In Fiji, for example, the local tuna-processing plant was recently shut down for two months because of poor catches.

For developed countries, declining fish supplies may mean less profit for the industrial-scale fishing fleets that ply for fish offshore, and loss of jobs in fishing communities. When fish becomes scarcer and more expensive, as present trends suggest, consumers can switch to meat and poultry. But for small island countries, diminishing catches can have a devastating impact on local food supplies — for some islands, fish are the only indigenous source of animal protein — and on the livelihood of men and women who fish or work in associated industries, as boat-builders, packers, distributors and retailers.

Foreign Fleets

Although small island States have rights over all the resources within their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), which extend 200 nautical miles from their shorelines, most of these countries lack the capital and technology to engage in extensive industrial-scale offshore fishing. Instead they sell the fishing rights for their offshore waters to high-technology fleets from developed countries, which are eager to maintain or extend those arrangements as their domestic fish supplies are exploited to a maximum. The foreign exchange generated by these fishing fees is often a major revenue source for islands, especially for Pacific countries such as Kiribati, the Federated States of Micronesia and Tuvalu, which preside over EEZs far larger than their land areas.

Surveillance of the harvest from those foreign fishing vessels, however, has often proved extremely difficult and expensive for small island countries, which lack the equipment and trained personnel to monitor and enforce the provisions of fishing arrangements. Although it is difficult to prove, many island peoples suspect that foreign fleets take more than their agreed catches. Global estimates suggest that illegal fish catches could run 30 to 50 per cent above reported catches. This would help to explain how an ever-expanding world fleet continues to operate while officially losing over $20 billion annually, comments a

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recent article in *The Economist*. Such poaching accelerates the depletion of fish stocks, threatening long-term sustainability, as well as depriving small island States of much-needed revenue.

In theory, the inshore fishing which provides food for small island countries is not seriously affected by foreign fleets, which hunt different fish stocks in waters farther offshore. Local fish supplies are generally being depleted by an increasing number of artisanal fishermen using low-technology methods. But in Solomon Islands, for example, local fishing people claim that foreign tuna fleets illegally take small fish from their lagoons to use as bait. Because these bait fish are also a food source for the inshore fish, this practice can affect local catches.

Unless small island countries can monitor and manage both offshore and inshore fishing within their EEZs, it is only a matter of time before they face the same crisis of depleted stocks that now confronts developed countries.

Damage to Coral Reefs

A related problem faced by small islands is the accelerating destruction of coral reefs — often called the "rain forests of the sea". The reefs are a critical part of marine ecosystems, and a native habitat for many fish species, but these fragile environments are being disrupted by growing development and increasing numbers of tourists.

In Pacific islands such as Western Samoa, Fiji, the Marshall Islands and Tonga, coral reefs have also been damaged by destructive fishing practices that use dynamite and other explosives left over from World War II to kill or stun fish. All the Pacific island countries report major declines in reef-based fish stocks, crustaceans and shellfish. In Maldives, coral is "mined" for use in building new homes. Parts of the Caribbean have experienced a decline of up to 50 per cent in coral reefs and reef-based fish over the past 40 years.

Better Management Needed

The Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States will address ways in which small islands can cooperate more closely in managing marine resources to ensure their long-term sustainability.

Integrating coastal and marine resource management into overall development strategies is key to developing sustainable fishing policies. This includes better waste treatment — to reduce marine pollution — and protection of mangroves, sea grass beds and lagoons that are rich habitats for fish.

To help stabilize fish populations, many small islands advocate better fisheries management and strengthening of the enforcement powers of regulatory bodies to ensure adherence to fish-catch guidelines. Small islands are also requesting assistance to improve their domestic technology for fish storage, distribution and marketing—which could reduce the considerable amount of waste and spoilage.

Partly in recognition that conventional management techniques have failed in small island countries, there is a trend among island peoples and international experts towards reviving traditional knowledge and ways for regulating use of the ocean's resources. Involvement of local villages is especially important for many small islands, because marine resources are usually owned communally, with individuals having users' rights rather than a private property right. Indigenous wisdom that, for example, prohibits fishing on certain days in relation to lunar cycles has been found to have scientific grounds in the spawning cycles of fish. But, unless they are consciously promoted, such traditional methods tend to break down under pressures from urbanization and the commercialization of fisheries.

Small islands are also seeking input into high-seas fishing negotiations being conducted by the United Nations Conference on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks. Of special concern is unregulated fishing for tuna in international waters by industrial fleets. Because tuna migrate widely, excessive high-seas harvests deplete catches within the EEZs of many Pacific islands. It is hoped that, before they conclude in August 1994, the UN negotiations will produce strong guidelines, if not legally binding rules, to regulate high-seas fishing. These regulations would build on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which will enter into force in November 1994, although its provisions have been generally accepted for over a decade as customary international law.

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